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DEVINE ON DEFINING RELIGION

Tomis Kapitan

Philip E. Devine has presented insightful proposals for defining religion in his essay "On the Definition of Religion" (*Faith and Philosophy*, July 1986). But despite his illuminating discussion, particularly the treatment of borderline cases, his account fails to distinguish religion as a process or goal-oriented activity from religion as a body of doctrine, and is mistaken (or perhaps unclear) in its proposal that religion *per se* is committed to the existence of superhuman agents. These deficiencies are exposed herein, and a sketch of an alternative view of religion, inspired by the views of both William James and Josiah Royce, is set forth.

I. Devine's Program

A plausible definition of "religion" must attempt to demarcate religion from other forms of human culture, such as art, politics, science, philosophy, and law. Since activities in these domains are intricably interwoven, this is a difficult requirement to meet. Religious systems, in particular, not only incorporate achievements, beliefs, and practices of other cultural forms, but differ widely among themselves, complicating, even discouraging, the task of demarcation. Equally troubling are the broad and diverse applications of the term 'religion.' But before yielding to skeptical despair, the importance of a definition should be kept in view; the very reference to religion in legal statutes, the respect accorded religious leaders and religious tracts, the often bitter and bloody disputes over domain, the anchoring of self-identity in religious affiliation, underscore the sensitive nature of the project. As Devine writes:

For shifting definitions of "religion" can be used to favor beliefs and institutions with which one is in sympathy, and to penalize those to which one is hostile. (p. 271)

This said, Devine launches into his own attempt at a definition. Taking the standard forms of Christianity as his "paradigm" he lists two criteria for the existence of a religion:

The first criterion is doctrinal; a religion affirms the existence of one or more superhuman agents, on whose favor the welfare of human beings depends The second criterion is psychosocial or functional. A

religion by the second criterion unifies, through a system of symbolic representations, the framework by which an individual or group regulates its thought and its life, and thus manages to maintain in them some semblance of coherence. (p. 272)

Neither criterion by itself is sufficient for the existence of religion; not the first because it fails to distinguish religion from any philosophical or scientific theory which endorses the same thesis, nor the second since a wide variety of normative codes can be similarly characterized. What is unclear is whether Devine intends them to be *jointly* sufficient or as individually necessary; while this is as close as he comes to defining religion, he expresses misgivings that offering necessary and sufficient conditions is the proper pattern of analysis, at least for the case at hand (p. 271). Again, with his "less central" criteria, i.e., the presence of a concept of salvation, the existence of sacred objects, the existence of a religious community, a canon of Scripture, prayer, crisis-solving strategies, and an embodiment of protest against aspects of the existing order that keep people in bondage, there is no indication, given his undefined use of 'criteria,' that any is either necessary or sufficient for religion.

II. Goal-Oriented Activity

A reliable definition of religion must capture the sense in which a person can *be* "religious" and, similarly, in which religion is, at least in part, a mode of living or an activity, specifically, *goal-oriented* activity. It may seem odd to speak in these terms, as though one might engage in religion in the way that a musician performs and composes music or a physicist conducts experiments and devises theories. Religion is neither an action nor a set of actions. However, by *being* religious one certainly thinks, acts and lives in the pursuit of characteristic ends, e.g., procuring divine favor or attaining Nirvana, whether one does so by means of overt physical behavior or through patterned mental activity in the form of belief, worship, meditation, and so forth. The "goal-oriented" nature of the religious traditions may differ.

This not only requires a distinction between religion *per se* and particular religious systems, viz., between religion and religions, but forces abandonment of the popular conflation of religion with a body of doctrine. Conceived as process, religion must not be confused with a set of religious creeds. To be sure, doctrine, both normative and metaphysical (theological), may be essential for religion to exist, and particular religions are typically differentiated in terms of doctrine. But religion itself, in the sense in which one can *be* religious, is not doctrine, much less doctrine that has emerged from a specific set of religious visions.

Devine is sensitive to the practical aspect of religion, but his two criteria do not

succeed in drawing the process/doctrine distinction. Instead, they function as generic conditions which any body of metaphysical and normative *claims* must satisfy in order to qualify as religious doctrine. The first sets forth a core metaphysical thesis presumably affirmed by all religions, though allowing diverse religions to vary in their accounts of superhuman agency. The second singles out the sense in which religion has a *regulatory* aspect, embodying recognition of its relation to the pursuit of ends. Yet even here Devine employs the phrase 'a religion' to designate either the *framework* of unification which, by some mode of symbolic representations, serves to regulate, or the representations themselves (p. 273), retaining its image as a body of doctrine, specifically, normative doctrine, though religions may differ in their normative content. In no clear way is religion as such singled out as a goal-oriented activity or distinguished from the more purely theoretical domains of ideology, theology, or theistically-based morality which underwrite the framework of *a* religion.¹ Similarly, no room is made for religious nature of a person who is yet struggling to discover or formulate a unifying framework appropriate for the regulation of life, e.g., the prophets in the attempt to articulate their experience. Indeed, a framework or system of representations is usually the *result* of antecedent *religious* endeavor, but Devine's criteria provide no grounds for making this sort of judgment.²

The foregoing indicates nothing about what the characteristic goals of religion are, nor whether there is any other thread common to all religious activity. It does not deny that the religious process utilizes doctrinal statements, common or otherwise, nor does it destroy the possibility that the two criteria specify necessary conditions for the existence of a religion. The point is simply that his two criteria do not yield a characterization whereby religion, in the sense in which one can *be* religious, is distinguished from religion as a body of doctrine. The former, being a process from which the latter both emerges yet conditions, is the core of religion *per se*, and an accurate definition must be attentive to its primacy.

III. Superhuman Agency

Devine's first criterion is too restrictive on the doctrinal side. By tying religion to the notion of a "superhuman" agent upon whose favor human welfare depends, he rules out a good deal of religious tradition. The objection is not that religion fail to affirm the existence of a superhuman or trans-human reality (being, entity, force, order, etc.) upon which human welfare is in some way dependent, nor that such reality is in some sense "higher"; indeed, a similar affirmation appears to hold in acknowledged manifestations of religion.³ Rather, the problem is whether this trans-human or superhuman entity(s) is an *agent* which can *favor* or not, in short, whether it is a *personal* deity capable of preference, choice, intention, and beneficent actions. Exceptions abound in well-acknowledged religious traditions, for

example, both Taoism and the classical forms of Buddhism deny a personal aspect to the higher reality (despite deification of bodhisattvas in popular forms of Mahayana Buddhism). A good deal of the Neo-Platonic tradition in religion, particularly among certain Philosophical and Sufi movements in Medieval Islam, explicitly disavow a view of the One (=God) in personal terms, *viz.*, as an "agent" capable of intentional action. The preeminent mode of divine activity, creation, was viewed as an eternal necessary process of emanation, not as something that The One "did."

We would expect Devine to be more sensitive to this point given his attention to what he calls "borderline" cases, Spinozism, Marxism and Free Market ideology. On the surface, none of these world-views affirms a superhuman agent, and it is perplexing why he ranks them as borderline at all. Spinoza's "God," Devine himself emphasizes, always acts out of necessity, and much like the neo-Platonic One, is not a person-like agent with the power to grant or withhold favor. By the first criterion, therefore, the judgment should be that Spinozism *fails* to qualify as a religion, not that it is a borderline case, and insofar as Spinozism appeals to the religious side of one's nature, as Devine admits, this must be for reasons other than the criteria he singles out. The same holds even more strongly for Marxism and Economism. Both refer to natural and social forces upon which human welfare depends, e.g., historical necessity, the marketplace, or, simply, economic laws, and I suspect that it is this that inclines Devine, with his first criterion in mind, to classify such ideologies as borderline. But it is an abuse of terminology to label such forces "agents," as it would be to so refer to botanical categories or the laws of Thermodynamics.

These exceptions force a modification of the common doctrinal core of diverse religious systems, and undermine Devine's first criterion. One might object that we are taking his talk of "agency" and "favor" too literally, but figurative language runs the risk of blurring crucial distinctions; the divide between agency theisms and non-agency theisms, between the theologies of Will and the theologies of Impersonal Order, is too significant to obliterate in a philosophically sensitive discussion of religion.⁴ A common core may yet bind the two approaches, and recourse to some vision of a trans-human reality upon which humans are dependent may be exactly what is needed, especially if conceived broadly enough to include historical necessity, the market, or economic laws. If so, there is more reason to acknowledge the borderline character of mentioned philosophies, ideologies or world-views, but not on the grounds that Devine provides.⁵

IV. A Sketch of an Improved Account

In section II it was mentioned that a definition of religion must accommodate the religious attitude and recognize the goal-oriented nature of religious life. It is time

to ask whether there is any common core to this attitude or any generic goal essential to the religious process. While there is ample literature on the topic, I will confine myself to an account inspired by the writings of William James and Josiah Royce.⁶

The account can be summarized in three points. *First*, religion is man's response to certain sorts of experience, specifically, to a felt deficiency in the very conditions which have made such experiences possible. As James puts it, there is an "uneasiness" about our own condition as we naturally stand.⁷ Some locate the deficiency in a lack of something of great value, e.g., a proper code of behavior, while others point to the presence of something positively evil, e.g., Satan, human wickedness, or man's mortality. A tidier generalization locates the genesis of religion in suffering, sorrow, and the consequent reflection upon evil.⁸

Second, there is a pressing need to find some remedy for the felt deficiency. Solutions can be based upon radically different perspectives, from a denial that evil exists to a fatalistic acceptance of evil as inevitable, but throughout, religion is concerned with enabling humans to overcome, to deal with, or to come to terms with, the felt deficiency. There is good reason to refer to a quest for "salvation" at this stage, provided this notion is purged of traditional Judaic-Christian-Islamic overtones, at least for the purposes of generic description.⁹ If so, then the quest for salvation is absolutely central to the definition of religion, contrary to Devine's indication of its "less central" status.

Third, there appears to be a general conception that salvation is to be achieved through *some* sort of contact with or relationship to the trans-human reality upon which our welfare depends, despite the widely differing conceptions about what this relationship is or should be. The trans-human reality is seen as possessing some sort of efficacy for salvation, underlying its status as supremely valuable or, to use James' term, "divine." A metaphysics of the divine is needed to give the religious quest direction, to provide an identifiable and understandable object or locus for belief. It is this effort that can be ranked under the heading of 'theology,' though again, a generic concept must be kept free from a commitment to agency theism.¹⁰ Only through a theology can we understand *how* salvation is to be achieved.

In summary, three factors emerge as the principal ingredients of religion:

- (1) Evil (a felt deficiency)
- (2) Quest for Salvation (the urge to remedy this deficiency)
- (3) Divine Reality (the trans-human factor(s) harboring the efficacy requisite for salvation)

A tentative definition of religion can now be offered in these terms: religion is a quest on the part of finite beings (like humans) to become *saved* from (deal with, overcome, come to terms with, eliminate, etc.) *evil* by means of putting themselves into relationship with that which is *divine*. The terms 'to deal with,'

'evil,' and 'divine' should be construed as occurring *internally*, within the scope of the term 'quest' ascribing an intentional state, revealing conceptions that the beings themselves have of the activity in which they are engaging.¹¹ Accordingly, a religious being, possessed of religious concern and pursuing a religious goal, must have concepts of evil, salvation (dealing with evil) and divinity.

This definition captures the sense in which religion is primarily process, and only secondarily doctrine. Moreover, it is broad enough to bring virtually *any* mode of activity within the realm of religion: prayer, dancing, war, sexual intercourse, human sacrifice, music, even the most mundane aspects of everyday life; all that is required is a conviction that such actions are conducive, or more strongly, essential, to the religious end. Similarly, virtually *any* belief can be incorporated into a religious world view, especially those of a normative and cosmological nature (see the passage from Dewey cited in Note 1). It is not surprising, therefore, that Marxism *can* be construed religiously, *insofar as* its adherents adopt a religious attitude towards its identifying tenets; the evil to be dealt with is social injustice or the consciousness thereof, salvation is the arrival of a purely communist society or the confidence that such will come, and the divine saving force is Historical Necessity. The same pattern may be detected in the religious approach to Economism or to Spinozistic philosophy. Devine's premonitions here are entirely correct, though not exactly for the reasons he adduces.

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NOTES

1. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 7, wrote the following: "... the adjective 'religious' denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historical religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal."

A contrast with the problem of defining *science* may be helpful here. Ernan McMullin in "The History and Philosophy of Science (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), vol. V, p. 15, distinguishes two senses of the term 'science;' one in which science is viewed as a collection of propositions, statements of data, explanations, laws, and theories, and the other in which it is considered as the ensemble of all the activities of scientists in the pursuit of their goals of scientific understanding. Thus, while *science* is commonly thought of in terms of its products, *viz.*, its theoretical conceptions or even its technological achievements, it is also something that investigators *do*. Furthermore, an understanding of science, a realization of how it differs from other cultural domains, necessitates some grasp of the typical *aim* of such activity, e.g., knowledge of the underlying structures of things, of their governing laws, etc. By comparison, as religion is even less an intellectual

discipline with a consumating aim of acquiring knowledge, it seems a greater error to identify it with doctrine, theoretical or normative or both. A provision must be made, in its very characterization, for the nature of religion as a goal-oriented process in which individuals can partake.

2. Devine is not insensitive to the goal-oriented aspect of religion. He speaks of a Supreme Good towards which the beliefs and practices *characteristic of a religion* point (p. 274, my emphasis), and states that it is the possibility of union or communion with the Supreme Good that the two criteria of religion are unified, particularly in a religion like Christianity (p. 274). Yet this is to *add* an element not overtly contained in either criterion, despite his claim that the notion of a Supreme Good is “part” of one criterion establishing presence of a religion (presumably, the second). The latter is confusing given his subsequent refusal to make the aim towards or “ultimate concern” with a Supreme Good a necessary condition for existence of a religion—citing the religion of Homeric Greece—while nonetheless *retaining* both criteria. (The example might be disputed insofar as the Greeks invoked divine intervention through prayers and libations, and, recalling the importance of the Delphic Oracle, vigorously sought to discern the divine “favor.” Such activities normally bespeak of reasonably significant or “ultimate” concern with achieving at least the goods of this life, whether appropriately “supreme” or not.) Perhaps he means simply that directing adherents of a religion to a Supreme Good is *one* of the ways in which the unification spoken of in the second criterion can be achieved; indeed, modifying the latter to include aim toward a Supreme Good will blunt the impact of the criticism just offered insofar as a religious goal is now explicitly specified. It would not, however, overcome the process/doctrine difficulty.

3. Arnold Toynbee in *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), has claimed that at least the “higher” religions posit a spiritually greater presence in the Universe with which man should seek communion and harmony. See also his chapter entitled “Religion: A Perennial Need?” in Arnold Toynbee, *Surviving the Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

4. I am using the term ‘theism’ in a generic sense to refer to the doctrine which affirms the existence of divine beings. It is a distinct matter whether these beings are “agents” in the proper sense.

5. In several places, Arnold Toynbee has argued that Marxism has all the qualifications of a religion, for example, in his *Mankind and Mother Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 573. See also the works mentioned in note 3 above.

6. See William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1929), and Josiah Royce’s *Sources of Religious Insight* (New York: Scribner’s, 1914). The coupling of James and Royce on this issue may strike the reader as strange, especially in view of their numerous philosophical differences. Indeed, John E. Smith has written that the two are “opposite” in their interpretation of religion (see Smith’s *The Spirit of American Philosophy* SUNY, 1983, p. 79). Despite these differences, I discern, nonetheless, a common core in their respective approaches to the nature of religion.

7. James, *op. cit.* p. 498, and note the similar view in Royce, *op. cit.* pp. 9-12.

8. This generalization emerges in chapter VI of Royce *op. cit.* While James uses the term ‘evil’ more sparingly (see, for example, *op. cit.*, pp. 131, 160), his description of the “common nucleus” of all religions (pp. 498-9) reveals that the notion of evil has the centrality that it has in Royce’s own account.

9. Both James and Royce avail themselves of the term ‘salvation,’ for example, James *op. cit.*, p. 498 and Royce, *op. cit.*, p. 8, with both attentive to the necessity of a suitably broad interpretation.

10. See James *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32 where he writes that “religion means the feelings, acts, and

experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine." In his concern for achieving a neutral description he speaks of "higher powers" or a "higher part of the universe" (pp. 475- 509). Royce speaks, of a "master of life" and a "triumph of good in the universe," *op. cit.*, p. 223.

11. When a term occurs internally in contexts ascribing an intentional state it is intended to reveal the agent's mode of representation of the ascribed content, and in this I am following the usage of Hector-Neri Castaneda. See Castaneda's "Reference, Reality and Perceptual Fields," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 53, no. 6, (1980): 763-822, especially pp. 774-783.